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Everything Michigan

**THE GRAND RAPIDS
PRESS****Factory-run agency aids workers in life, on job**

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The old car was dead, again. Child care cost a mint.

Kenesha Thomas was worried. Could she keep her job with the auto supplier Spectrum Cubic Inc.?

It's a story all too familiar.

A worker desperately needs the job, but one setback after another has him or her teetering on the edge of unemployment and the boss looking for a replacement.

It's the start of a spiral downward.

But in the case of Thomas, a 29-year-old single mother of two, her employer came to the rescue. She kept her job of four years, and Spectrum Cubic, part of Spectrum Industries, avoided another employee turnover.

How did it happen? The company relied on the Source, an employee-help agency created by a coalition of Southwest Side factories three and a half years ago.

Thomas' case worker, Milly Chavez, found child-care money from the Michigan Department of Human Services. "That was a big help," said a relieved Thomas, who had been on welfare after leaving a job in South Carolina to be closer to home. "I can't afford day care for both" daughters.

Her case worker also found a program to help with repairs to Thomas' 1997 Malibu so she could drive from her Wyoming apartment to her quality-auditor job.

Without help from the Source, "I'd have lost my job, maybe," said Thomas, who hopes eventually for a career in criminal justice. Thomas and employees at seven other Southwest Side businesses all benefit from the Source, which focuses on helping entry-level workers hold onto their jobs; skills training, and referrals to social services.

About 250 employees are working with caseworkers at a given time and an average of 600 employees receive training each year.

It's all meant to keep crises, such as day care and car problems, from causing workers to miss work or even lose their jobs.

It's funded almost entirely by the eight businesses in partnership with the state Department of Human Services.

The CEOs of those companies view the Source not only as a positive social program, but a boon to the

bottom line.

Kevin Bassett, president of Spectrum Cubic, calculates he receives a 260 percent return on his company's contribution to the Source. That is based on benefits given directly to employees, the value of employee training and better retention rates.

Other companies are taking notice. Another branch of the Source may be forming soon on the Northwest Side.

"From the beginning, this has been extremely business-led," said executive director Andrew Brower. "This network allows these businesses to engage in socially responsible practices."

One of the early organizers was Mark Peters, president of Butterball Farms Inc., who wanted to emulate the successes of Cascade Engineering's "Welfare to Career" program. But his butter-products company is smaller.

The strength of the eight companies together make services available to employees that just one could not provide, Peters said.

The impact on Butterball Farms, 1435 Buchanan Ave. SW, has been dramatic.

The company has around 200 employees. In 1999, it processed 1,700 W-2 forms, which means 1,700 people worked at the company at some point during that year. Compare that with just 441 forms processed last year.

"It's unreal," Peters said. "Just from an administrative cost standpoint, it's huge." Turnover in a factory job costs a company about \$1,250 per job, according to the Source.

And Peters is not alone.

Leonard Slott, president and CEO of Vi-Chem Corp., attended the group's first meetings, but he didn't jump in right away. He considered the Source to be a charity, and his company had already spent its philanthropy budget.

Now, he sees it differently.

"It's a value-added activity," he said. "We're doing things that enhance people's ability to get a job, keep a job, and to advance in those careers."

And just like Butterball Farms, "our turnover has gone down substantially," he said.

Liza Murrieta, who works in Vi-Chem human resources office, said prior to the firm's participation, turnover was 13 percent every four weeks. Now, it's down to 2 percent.

"Absolutely we're getting value," Slott said. " . . . It's a substantially good investment."

Pridgeon & Clay Inc. employee Martha Sikes is making an investment in her future with the help of the Source.

For eight years, Sikes has been a material-review auditor for the auto supplier at

50 Cottage Grove St. SW. She loves her job and wants to advance.

After she heard of the Source through its newsletter, she signed up for the "Catching onto Computers" class.

"I realized that as time goes on, computers are going to become a big part of every-day life, and I didn't know a whole lot about them," she said.

Sikes also came back to the Source for help in returning to college.

The 47-year-old wanted to earn a degree in quality assurance at Grand Rapids Community College.

At her first attempt on her own, she was stymied by the overwhelming financial-aid paperwork. But last year, she talked to her caseworker at the Source, Rachel Kunnath, who walked her through the process.

"She was so nice and kind in helping me through every stage," she said.

This fall, Sikes started classes.

Healthy approaches

The agency also has taken on a problem vexing both workers and employers: controlling health-care costs.

It is co-sponsoring a new wellness program with Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities Initiative and Morningstar Health. It's optional: five of the eight companies signed up.

A nurse and community health worker visit employees at work to educate them and measure key health factors: smoking, exercise, height and weight, blood pressure and cholesterol.

There also are incentives for healthier lifestyles: \$25 per quarter is awarded to workers, for example, who stop smoking or maintain a healthy weight.

"We are screening for the major health care issues we deal with every day," said Dr. Tom Peterson, medical director of Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities initiative.

"About two-thirds of the deaths in this country are caused by those issues."

Healthier employees mean less absenteeism and decreased health-care costs, particularly if problems can be spotted early.

Data from other companies with similar wellness programs paid off handsomely, Peterson said.

After three years with participation over 75 percent, "for every dollar they put in, traditionally they get \$3 to \$10 back in savings," he said.

Brower said the wellness program has proven to be popular.

The goal was 75 percent enrollment after three years. Instead, 83 percent signed on when the program kicked off in June.

Though it's fairly new, the Source has been getting some attention. Gov. Jennifer Granholm has visited twice.

And it's not just politicians taking notice. A group of Northwest Side businesses has been looking at the data and considering whether to take a similar step.

If they go for it, there would be a satellite Source office in that neighborhood.

The identity of those businesses are under wraps for now, but Brower expects they will make a decision soon.

Peters said he would like to see more companies participate, especially since the program has been operating for years and has data to back up its claims of success.

"It's not even as much of a risk as it was three years ago because we've got numbers that show the return

value. .. Three and a half years ago, the people that started out, it was all on faith."

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